

# Miracle on the Vistula: The Red Army's Failure and the Birth of the Deep Operations Theory of Annihilation

A Monograph

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## Abstract

Miracle on the Vistula: The Red Army's Failure and the Birth of the Deep Operations Theory of Annihilation, MAJ Charles E. Thompson, US Army, 41 pages.

In 1920, Soviet Russia and the newly independent Polish state fought a brief but intense war, one with immense repercussions for the strategic context of post-World War I Europe, and for the military art. The Red Army's failure to spread the Bolshevik revolution to the heart of the European continent forced a reevaluation of both the politico-strategic outlook and the military theories that would guide the world's first socialist state. The profound contributions to the military art made by Soviet theorists in the years following the war with Poland include the first discussions regarding the operational level of war and the concept of operational art, as well as the theoretical foundation for the Red Army's victory in World War II: the Deep Operations Theory of Annihilation.

This monograph seeks to explore the impact of the war with Poland and its influence on the theoretical breakthroughs made by a small group of Red Army officers in the 1920s and 1930s. The Polish-Soviet War will serve as a single case study through which phenomena characteristic of later theoretical developments will be examined. Particular attention will be paid to the presence of elements related to successive operations, rear area operations, and a focus on the annihilation of the enemy through the use of shock armies. These will serve as the principal criteria for establishing a direct link between the experience of the Polish-Soviet War and the later development of Deep Operations theory.

Translated works of the Soviet authors of Deep Operations theory provided the majority of the evidence to this claim. These men used their experience against Poland as a primary case study through which they envisioned future warfare in Eastern Europe and the phenomena observed there would form the basis for their work on Deep Operations.

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## Acronyms and Terms

<i>Konarmiya</i>	Soviet Russian First Cavalry Army, lit. “horse army”
PU-36	Provisional Field Regulations for the Red Army - 1936
RKKA	Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
<i>Voenspetsy</i>	Former officers of the Imperial Army hired by the Red Army as “military specialists”

## Introduction

Comrades, we have been able to repel a more terrible enemy; we have been able to defeat our own landowners and capitalists, and we shall defeat the Polish landowners and capitalists too!

—V.I. Lenin, *Speech to troops leaving for the front, 5 May 1920*

However, a simple assemblage of superior forces and materiel is not sufficient to defeat the enemy. It is mandatory that cooperation be established between all branches of the service deployed in the same area and at all echelons; the combat operations of troops in different areas must be coordinated.

—PU-36, *Soviet Provisional Field Service Regulation*

The undoubtedly difficult situation that resulted has not been a total loss to us. The war against Poland, or, to be more precise, the July-August campaign, has radically changed the international political situation.

— V.I. Lenin, *Speech delivered at the Ninth All-Russia Conference of the Russian Communist Party, 22 September 1920*

The interwar period bridging the two World Wars of the twentieth century saw tumultuous social change, drastic economic swings, and the rise of radical ideologies across the globe. Out of this seething caldron emerged an explosion of military innovation, leading to significant changes in theory, doctrine, and technology for virtually all of the great powers. Following the horror of the Great War, military professionals and statesmen alike attempted to come to grips with the phenomena and technology of modern warfare. Nowhere was this impulse more acute than in the fledgling Soviet Russian Republic and its successor, the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Defeated on the battlefield by the Kaiser's army, torn apart by violent revolution, and subjected to years of debilitating civil war and foreign intervention, the military and political leaders who emerged from this chaos sought

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<sup>1</sup> Josef Stalin, "The Formation of the Union of the Soviet Republics" (report delivered at the First Congress of Soviets of the U.S.S.R. on December 30, 1922), accessed March 26, 2017, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1922/12/30.htm>. The Soviet Russian Republic was established in the wake of the October 1917 Revolution by the Bolshevik (majority) Party, led by Vladimir Lenin. In December 1922 this entity was joined by three likeminded regimes to form the Soviet Union. So, in the case of the Soviet-Polish War of 1919-1921, the term "Soviet" represents only Soviet Russia. This conflict is also commonly referred to as the Russo-Polish war or Polish-Bolshevik War.

to develop the means to succeed on the modern battlefield and secure their homeland, and with it, the promise of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Much of what we believe characteristic of the Soviet state makes it hard to imagine it providing fertile ground for a vibrant, open, and transformative intellectual debate on warfare. However, this is exactly what occurred in Soviet Russia during the period between the Russian Civil War and the late 1930s, where a veritable “storehouse of theoretical innovation” emerged.<sup>2</sup> A group of brilliant officers, led by the young Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky and composed of both experienced former Tsarists and energetic Red Army leaders, directed their efforts towards the development of a new theory of warfare, one which sought to address the issues of modern warfare while living up to the ideals espoused by the ruling Bolshevik Party. Their theories would lead to the emergence of the concept of operational art and would eventually evolve into the theory of Deep Operations for Annihilation, which (after several fits and starts) would provide the theoretical underpinning of the Red Army’s victory over the Wehrmacht in World War II.<sup>3</sup> Confident that their efforts had produced a theory that overcame modern warfare’s most difficult obstacles, Tukhachevsky’s former student Georgii Isserson declared in his masterful work of synthesis *The Evolution of Operational Art* that “never has a strategy for annihilation enjoyed such splendid prerequisites for its full realization.”<sup>4</sup> The focus on annihilation would serve as one of the linchpins of this emerging concept, with Tukhachevsky taking great pains to highlight the physical nature of

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<sup>2</sup> John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918-1941*, 3rd ed. (Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), xviii.

<sup>3</sup> The terms “Deep Operations” and “Deep Battle” are often conflated erroneously. In this monograph, “Deep Operations” will be used predominantly, with “Deep Battle” used only when discussing the purely tactical objectives it was developed to solve. To further complicate matters, various translations omit the modifier “of (or for) annihilation” that Isserson and others used to fully describe their theory. Here, “Deep Operations” will be used often without its modifier, but purely for convenience.

<sup>4</sup> Georgii S. Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, ed. and trans. Bruce Menning (1936; repr., Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013), 69.



this destruction. Indeed, he would dismiss the “pernicious military idealism” that led others to assign some vague psychological aim to operations, demanding instead that the only acceptable military goal “must be the destruction of the organism itself.”<sup>5</sup>

How was such an impressive theoretical breakthrough possible, particularly within the most unstable, isolated, ideologically hidebound, and least modern of European states? Despite many of the challenges faced by the young Communist state (and often because of them) the conditions faced by Tukhachevsky and his fellow theorists were surprisingly ripe for such innovation. With the very survival of the Soviet state at risk since its inception and its continued existence due mainly to the herculean efforts of the Red Army, questions concerning military policy and security enjoyed top priority amongst the Bolshevik leadership. Given the time and resources needed to develop theories to carry the Red Army through the next war, this remarkable group looked to history and their own recent combat experiences for inspiration.

With both World War I and the numerous conflicts that combined to form the Russian Civil War fresh in their minds, one event in particular stood out as requiring detailed examination. Either lumped in as merely a component of the Russian Civil War, or forgotten altogether by later Western commentators, the brief but intense war between Poland and Soviet Russia from 1919-1920 was a seminal event for the individuals who would go on to reshape military theory. Indeed, the entire Soviet military enterprise would devote considerable time and effort to dissecting this conflict, including over 250 published studies of the war in the decade that followed and a prominent role assigned to it in the new “Conduct of Operations” course at the Red Army’s Military Academy (later Frunze Academy).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Simpkin, *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii* (London: Brassey’s Defence Publishers, 1987), 87.

<sup>6</sup> Michael D. Krause and R. Cody Phillips, *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2005), 243; Nikolai Varfolomeev, “Strategy in an Academic Formulation” (1928) in *Selected Readings in the History of Soviet Operational Art*, trans. Harold S. Orenstein (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Soviet Army Studies Office, 1990), 6.

What is it about this conflict that consumed so much of the Red Army's interest and attention, all out of proportion to its size, duration, and seeming import? When compared to the Great War, the Polish-Soviet War obviously seems like a minute affair (as any conflict not named World War II does). However, with two implacable foes fielding massive armies armed with modern tools of war such as tanks and aircraft, employed across vast spaces, fighting a war of maneuver, this conflict does indeed merit further examination. At the time, even in the shadow of World War I, the climactic Battle of Warsaw was referred to as "the eighteenth decisive battle of the world" by the British ambassador to Poland, Viscount D'Abernon.<sup>7</sup>

What is now a historical footnote for most today was a life-changing experience for the officers who drove the Red Army's intellectual renaissance in the next decade. What was deemed "the Miracle on the Vistula" by Poland and the western European nations was nothing short of a crisis for the world's sole socialist state. While many wished to dismiss the conflict as an anomalous bump on the road to worldwide revolution, key Red Army theorists recognized the crisis for what it was; and more importantly, they recognized it as "the indication...that an occasion for retooling had arrived."<sup>8</sup> Stymied in its first attempt to foster "revolution from without," the Soviets were forced to rethink both their theory of warfare and their grand strategy.

Tukhachevsky in particular, as the commander of the Western Front and senior Red Army officer in the field during the shocking reverse at the gates of Warsaw, recognized the need for introspection and the need to distill the critical lessons from this fluid but flawed campaign. Delivering numerous lectures on the conflict and his experience in the years following the war, Tukhachevsky and his likeminded theorists were determined to understand what made the Polish War different from other contemporary conflicts, and to apply those lessons in a theory of warfare

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<sup>7</sup> Clarence A. Manning, "Battle on the Vistula: The Soviet-Polish Campaign of 1920," *The Journal of the American Military Institute*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring, 1939), 25.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 76.

that would prepare the Soviet state for future wars.<sup>9</sup> For officers hoping to ensure Soviet success in the next war, the Polish War was deemed more relevant than other contemporary conflicts.

Among the most important reasons for this view were the facts that: A) unlike World War I, this war could not be blamed on the hated Tsarist regime; B) unlike the various conflicts of the Civil War, it was an interstate rather than intrastate affair; C) despite these differences, it did share the environmental and geographical aspects of those other conflicts that exemplified warfare in the vast expanses of the Russian homeland. Taking these factors into account, there was no easy way to dismiss the Polish-Soviet War with a one-dimensional explanation using a prevailing theory of warfare. Given a recent conflict characterized by phenomena both indicative of the unchanging geography of Eastern Europe and of likely trends in future warfare, Tukhachevsky and his comrades took to their analysis with gusto.

While these characteristics made the Polish-Soviet War particularly appropriate for investigation, what is it about this conflict that made it serve as such a powerful catalyst to the development of the theories that would eventually become Deep Operations theory of annihilation? Here we see two elements that stand out. First, “this was fundamentally a war of movement,” a fact recognized by many as one of the defining aspects of future war.<sup>10</sup> This focus on large unit maneuver, coupled with the sheer size and mass of the armies likely to be engaged in such a conflict, would form the nucleus of the Deep Operations concept. Second, this war was the first unequivocal operational and strategic defeat for the new Soviet state. As the standard bearer for worldwide revolution, this unpleasant reality necessitated a comprehensive review of both their strategy and theory of warfare. This review would lead to the development of operational art in the Soviet Union and the establishment of Deep Operations theory of

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<sup>9</sup> Earl F. Ziemke, *The Red Army 1918-1941: From Vanguard of World Revolution to US Ally* (New York: Taylor & Francis Books, 2004), 133.

<sup>10</sup> Manning, “Battle on the Vistula,” 14.

annihilation as a war-winning doctrine, while simultaneously shaping the strategic environment of Eastern Europe that would prevail until the outbreak of World War II.

This monograph will employ a single case study methodology to discern the impact of the Polish-Soviet War on the development of Red Army theory in the interwar period. Presented chronologically, it will examine the context and conduct of the war itself using the principles of Deep Operations theory as a lens to highlight the war's effect on Soviet theorists. In addition to the characteristics named in the preceding paragraphs, the following criteria, all critical elements of Deep Operations theory, will be used to determine the impact of the Polish-Soviet War on its development. Foremost among these criteria will be the concept of successive operations, directly tied to the Soviet understanding of the deepening of the modern battlefield, a simple notion articulated by Tukhachevsky and others that would serve as a foundational concept for both Deep Operations and Soviet operational art as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

A second criterion to be highlighted is the importance of operations in the rear area. While not a revolutionary concept, Triandafillov and Varfolomeev in particular realized that modern warfare would demand far more of these operations than previous conflicts, particularly regarding securing lines of communication and political influence operations in occupied areas.

The last criterion emphasized will be the concept of annihilation and the use of shock armies to achieve it. This idea engendered fierce debate in the 1920s and continues to be argued to this day. However, a review of the principal theoretical works produced following the war, culminating in the publishing of Provisional Field Service Regulation-36 (PU-36), which

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<sup>11</sup> M. Sakharov, "Problems of Strategy and Operational Art in Soviet Military Works, 1917-1940" (1965) in *Selected Readings in the History of Soviet Operational Art*, trans. Harold S. Orenstein (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Soviet Army Studies Office, 1990) 62. This piece was published during the fascinating period of rehabilitation of the images and ideas of those "non-persons" liquidated and erased by Stalin during the purges in the late 1930s. In it, Marshall Sakharov describes the importance of successive operations, the role of Tukhachevsky and others at the Red Army Academy in developing it, and the prominent role assigned to the analysis of the 1920 campaign in Poland.

established Deep Operations as the theoretical foundation of Red Army operations, reveals that the concept of annihilation is integral to the idea of Deep Operations and must never be separated from it.<sup>12</sup> To accomplish this central goal of annihilation, Soviet theorists focused on the design and use of combined arms shock armies, the precursors of which were used in 1920.

In pursuit of this examination, primary sources were used whenever possible. Unfortunately, due to the linguistic limitations of the author and the early deaths of several of the period's most notable theorists (and the subsequent suppression of their ideas), this monograph relies heavily on extant translations of primary source material. Foremost among these are the translations of A.A. Svechin's *Strategy*, edited by Kent D. Lee, V.K. Triandafillov's *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, edited by Jacob W. Kipp, and G.S. Isserson's *The Evolution of Operational Art*, translated by Bruce W. Menning. Of paramount significance is the doctrinal distillation of their work captured in PU-36. More prominent figures such as Lenin and Trotsky have had their words published innumerable times in the last century, allowing relatively easy access to their thoughts and pronouncements via the internet.

Equally useful are the groundbreaking analyses of Soviet theory and doctrine produced late in the Cold War, most notably by Bruce W. Menning, Jacob W. Kipp, David M. Glantz, Richard Simpkin, and David R. Stone. With others, these men played a critical role in bringing Soviet theory to the shores of the United States, and with it a newfound appreciation for operational art.

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<sup>12</sup> Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 14; Joint Publications Research Service, *Provisional Field Regulations for the Red Army 1936* (Springfield, VA: National Technical Information Service, 1986), 2. The second general principle is worth quoting at length as it applies across the spectrum of military action, from strategic to tactical - "Red Army combat operations will always be oriented toward the annihilation of the enemy. Gaining a decisive victory and the total destruction of the enemy are the basic objectives in a war imposed upon the USSR." The Soviet authors of PU-36 are clearly far more unequivocal about this concept than many modern interpretations would lead us to believe!

Several histories of the early Red Army and the Polish-Soviet War provide an exceptional description of the turbulent times that served as the incubator for our theorists. Earl F. Ziemke and John Erickson's work on the Red Army, and Norman Davies' history of the Polish-Soviet War stand out in this regard.

Most fascinating of all however, is Josef Pilsudski's autobiographical account of the conflict, *Year 1920*. Penned as a response to Tukhachevsky's analysis of the campaign, the Polish commander helpfully includes the work of his adversary (military and literary) in the last chapters of his work. Pilsudski's clarity of thought and fierce nationalism inevitably lead one to wonder what might have been, had this first-rate military professional been alive for the next war.

This monograph will proceed chronologically, first establishing the strategic context prior to the Polish-Soviet War. This will include a review of the impact of World War I, particularly its role in triggering the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent Civil War. This section will also include a discussion on the theories of war and warfare driving the leaders of the Soviet leadership, most notably Lenin and Trotsky, and later Joseph Stalin.

With the stage set for the war itself the monograph will review the conduct of the war, highlighting those events, trends, and experiences that would catalyze the development of a wholly new theoretical approach. A short discussion on the political effects of the war's outcome and how it shaped the environment for the ensuing organizational, theoretical, and doctrinal changes in the Red Army will follow. A detailed examination of these changes will constitute the heart of the monograph and will focus on the effect of the Polish War experience and how it contributed to the debates and theorizing that preceded the development of Deep Operations theory. The publishing of PU-36, seen as the apogee of interwar Soviet theoretical and doctrinal development, will serve as a natural endpoint.

## Strategic Context

Before exploring the Polish-Soviet War and the subsequent theoretical renaissance it set off in Russia, a review of the unique political and military situation the combatants found themselves in is worthwhile. While the conflagration that was the First World War consumed all of the European powers and several experienced significant upheaval following the war, Russia's abrupt exit from the war followed by a society-shaking civil war set it apart. This section will examine the Russian experience and how it led to the revolutions of 1917, as well as its role in shaping the strategic and operational theories that would blossom fully in the peaceful period following the Polish War. The Russian Civil War itself will also be discussed, providing examples of the Bolshevik theories of war and warfare that proved unsuccessful on the drive to Warsaw in 1920. Indeed, the Russians faced two Kuhnian crises requiring a theoretical "retooling": the failure of traditional military art in the World War and the failure of revolutionary theories in the war against Poland.

## Clash of Empires in the East

No examination of political-strategic context on the European continent in the early twentieth century can escape the looming shadow of World War I. This is true even today, where one hundred years after its conclusion it is surpassed only by the cataclysmic second round that began in 1939. Of all the major political, military, and societal implications of the war, none was as earth shattering as the collapse of European empires that had fought a grinding duel for three years across the Eastern European plains. The first of the imperial dominoes to fall was the Romanov dynasty in Russia. Catastrophic results on the battlefield, coupled with an inability to manage societal upheaval and economic pressure at home, may have made the Tsar's fall inevitable, but the speed, scale, and far-reaching consequences of the coming change was something even the most committed socialists scarcely believed possible.

Before the war, Russia was regarded as the most underdeveloped European power, albeit one with a mammoth army and a seemingly stable autocratic regime. This overwhelming potential force loomed in the background of all pre-war planning sessions and it is likely that Germany's rapid entry into the war was an attempt to get out ahead of the Russian "steamroller."<sup>13</sup> For their part, Russian military leaders abandoned earlier plans that sagely emphasized a defensive strategy using the vast territorial and manpower advantages at hand. Instead, "like its counterparts everywhere in Europe, the Russian army accepted the offensive as the strongest form of war at all levels," which, coupled with their commitment to France, obligated them to launch an immediate offensive against the Central Powers.<sup>14</sup>

This offensive would take the shape of two concurrent thrusts against Germany in East Prussia and Austria-Hungary in Galicia, with the Galician operation designated as the main effort. For the fight against Germany, the Russian Northwest Front "seemed to have all the men and guns it needed," despite its secondary role.<sup>15</sup> This preponderance of force coupled with the leaders' familiarity with the terrain gave reason for confidence in the outcome of the upcoming clash.

However, the insurmountable shortcomings of the Russian army's command and control, logistics, and leadership functions soon came to the fore, with disastrous results. The wily and opportunistic German tandem of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff recognized and exploited the yawning gap between the Russian First and Second Armies and won one of the war's few decisive victories in remarkable fashion at Tannenberg. Not only had upwards of five divisions

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<sup>13</sup> Richard W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press: 2001), 41.

<sup>14</sup> Dennis Showalter, *Tannenberg: Clash of Empires, 1914* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2004), Kindle, 130.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.



been destroyed amongst the Masurian Lakes, but it also was “a moral defeat...of the first order, and it seriously undermined the troops’ faith in themselves and their commanders.”<sup>16</sup>

This faith would never truly be regained, as even Russian victories proved indecisive, fleeting, and above all, costly. Operations against the Hapsburgs in the southwest would enjoy more success, but like all the combatants, leaders would find themselves unable to translate tactical gains into strategic victory. Even the notable Brusilov Offensive of 1916 “lacked the means to properly exploit success,” resulting in a reversion to attritional tactics that “bled the army white and went far toward undermining what remained of its offensive spirit.”<sup>17</sup>

Overall, Russian losses in World War I are estimated at 1.3 million killed in action and nearly four million captured.<sup>18</sup> These enormous sacrifices never accomplished any appreciable gains and provided the final push sending the teetering Romanov Dynasty into the abyss. Many of the Tsar’s surviving soldiers sought to understand how such expenditures of blood and treasure failed to achieve the desired endstate. Like their counterparts in armies around the world, the question of how to win on the modern battlefield would dominate their lives in the coming decades. Unlike their counterparts, however, they would be doing it as citizens of the world’s first socialist state: a regime with unique theories of war and warfare, and a wary view of professional military men.

## Proletarians to Horse!

From 1917 to 1922, the Russian people experienced a period of rapid and dramatic socio-political change, played out in the background of a brutal civil war that “dwarfed all others of the twentieth century in scope and significance.”<sup>19</sup> From the ousting of the Romanovs in May 1917 and

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<sup>16</sup> Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 51.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>18</sup> John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 343.

<sup>19</sup> David Bullock, *The Russian Civil War: 1918-1922* (New York: Osprey, 2008), 4.

the Bolshevik Revolution that October, to the rise of the counterrevolutionary White armies and the full onset of the Russian Civil War, this period offers a view of a complex web of human interaction and misery unlike any other in history. A detailed examination of the Russian Civil War and the emergence of the Soviet Union is far beyond the scope of this monograph. However, an exploration of those events and ideas that shaped the new Red Army and its emerging theorists is necessary to understanding their actions in the war with Poland, as well as their later efforts to develop a theory that addressed the shortcomings of those it brought into the war.

Looking beyond the bewildering array of radical political groups vying for power (Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and Social Revolutionaries, etc.) and likewise past the ever-changing, inscrutable acronyms denoting the organizations that evolved into the labyrinthine Communist bureaucratic ecosystem, we find people with ideas. Big ideas such as “All Power to the Soviets!” and “Socialism in One Country,” would have a powerful effect on the course of world history.<sup>20</sup> Less grandiose ideas like echelon war, military specialists, and permanent revolution would have a similar effect on the development of the Red Army and the nucleus of theorists who would emerge from the chaos of the Russian Civil War.

The two figures at the helm of the socialist ship during this time were Vladimir Ilych Lenin and Leon Trotsky. It is almost impossible to envision the success of the revolution without the close partnership built between the respected theorist and political giant Lenin, and the tireless organizer and fiery orator Trotsky. While neither had any military experience to speak of, both would focus their keen intellects on the questions of what a Red Army should look like and how it should fight. For these committed Marxists, World War I presented “an anomaly of such scope and power that their ideological assumptions could not but undergo change.”<sup>21</sup> Curiously, Lenin found theoretical

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<sup>20</sup> Ziemke, *The Red Army 1918-1941*, 5, 154.

<sup>21</sup> Jacob W. Kipp, "Lenin and Clausewitz: The Militarization of Marxism, 1914-1921," *The Journal of Military History* 49, no. 4 (1985): 185.

solace in the words of Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, whose profound observation that “war is...a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means,” resonated deeply.<sup>22</sup> Revisiting his Marxist theoretical foundations through a Clausewitzian lens, Lenin realized that he could reconcile the anomaly of World War I with a new theory that sought to “transform the war into an international civil war, pitting class against class.”<sup>23</sup>

Returning to Russia in the midst of the May 1917 Revolution, armed with a new theory of warfare, Lenin found a capable and charismatic partner in Trotsky. Among their important points of agreement was their recognition of the need for trained leadership in both political and military positions. Once assigned as the People’s Commissar for Military Affairs in early 1918, Trotsky set out to promote effectiveness and professionalism in the Red Army, mainly through the acceptance of former Tsarist military leaders as military specialists (*voenspetsy*).<sup>24</sup> This commonsense action met with strong resistance from within the various socialist factions, to whom Trotsky argued that “the obvious interests of the revolution demanded that we enlist...men who had formerly...shown themselves outstandingly able,” which mollified some, but the question of the *voenspetsy* would remain an open sore for many others.<sup>25</sup> Despite concerns about their loyalty, the impact of the military specialists on the development of the Red Army is undeniable. A list of notable *voenspetsy* includes some of the most prominent figures in the theoretical renaissance that followed the civil war, such as Tukhachevsky, Svechin, and Triandafillov.

As revolution turned to civil war in early 1918, the fledgling Bolshevik state sought to achieve a more favorable balance of forces through expansion of the Red Army and by finally

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<sup>22</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.

<sup>23</sup> Kipp, “Lenin and Clausewitz,” 186.

<sup>24</sup> Ziemke, *The Red Army 1918-1941*, 35; Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, 318; Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 80.

<sup>25</sup> Leon Trotsky, “The Military Specialists and the Red Army,” December 1918, accessed 13 December 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/military/ch24.htm>.

signing a peace treaty with Germany. The harsh Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was tremendously unpopular, but Lenin saw it as necessary for the survival of the state, referring to it as “a Tilsit Peace,” where, like the Prussians against Napoleon, it could serve as “a respite and a means of mustering forces for new battles.”<sup>26</sup>

With their western flank secure (for now) and Red Army recruits pouring in by the tens of thousands to be led by a combination of military specialists and committed party members, Lenin and Trotsky could now devote their full attention and energies to the destruction of the counterrevolutionary forces springing up around the periphery of the Russian heartland. With the Russian Civil War in full swing by spring 1918, other influential personalities and ideas would emerge, each shaping the political and military course of the young socialist state. In many ways, the leaders of the various White armies played the most significant role in this regard, serving as an easy to identify antithesis to the emerging socialist ideal. Men such as Anton Denikin and Baron Vrangeli in the south, and Alexander Kolchak in the east provided the Red Army with menacing foils, tools of the imperialist powers and reactionary monarchist, capitalist forces. Adding to the drama were the residual presence of German troops along the western border and eventually allied interventionist forces in both the northern ports and far east of Russia, creating a veritable “Ring of Fronts.”<sup>27</sup>

The colorful cast of characters that emerged to confront and eventually defeat these sinister enemies of socialism became the first generation of Soviet heroes, their exploits and ideals held up as the paragon of communist virtue. They also came to supplant rapidly those of Trotsky and others who had played the key roles in the critical first months following the revolution. The rise of Mikhail Frunze provides a clear example. A committed party member with no military resume to

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<sup>26</sup> V.I. Lenin, “The Chief Task of Our Day,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 27, 4th English Ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 159-63, accessed 13 December, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/mar/11.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Ziemke, *The Red Army*, 66.

claim, he ascended to leadership positions in the east through connections and force of will.<sup>28</sup> However, once there Frunze would prove himself immensely capable, and his success in the east and in several other fronts justified his ranking as “a military leader of a new, Soviet school.”<sup>29</sup> Future Marshal Tukhachevsky would follow suit, serving with distinction under Frunze as a military specialist (although a dedicated party member as well) on several fronts and later at the Red Army Academy.<sup>30</sup> These men and others like them, *voenspetsy* and Red Commanders alike, would play critical roles in the Red Army’s victory, and even more so in the theoretical development that was to follow.

Other notable personalities emerging from the maelstrom of civil war earned their notoriety in similar ways, but would diverge drastically from the future Deep Operations team when it came to military theory and doctrine. These men would become known as the “Tsaritsyn Gang,” after the city their defense of earned them their spurs. They coalesced around a dour party loyalist named Josef Stalin, who would emerge as Trotsky’s greatest rival and Lenin’s successor. The undeniably impressive exploits of future Marshals Budennyi and Voroshilov were transformed into herculean achievements through Stalin’s ruthless control of the rear area and propaganda arms. Their emergent theory of warfare focused on the political reliability of the Red Army, the stability of the rear area, and operational mobility and decision through the use of the shock troops that made up the world’s first Cavalry Army (*konarmiya*, or horse army).<sup>31</sup>

The efforts of the Red Army’s new leaders and the determined leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, coupled with the failure of the White forces to achieve true unity of effort, led eventually

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<sup>28</sup> Ziemke, *The Red Army*, 87.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Simpkin, *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevsky* (London: Brassey’s Publishers, 1987), 7.

<sup>31</sup> Jacob Kipp, “The Tsarist and Soviet Operational Art,” in *The Evolution of Operational Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 64-95.

to victory for the forces of Communism in Russia. Flushed with victory and seemingly secure internationally, Lenin proclaimed at the Ninth Communist Party Congress in March 1920 that “we may now proceed with calm and firm assurance to the immediate tasks of peaceful economic development.”<sup>32</sup> This sense of security would prove illusory just weeks later, as the forces of newly sovereign Poland struck with unexpected vigor and speed.

## The Polish-Soviet War

The invasion of Soviet Ukraine by Polish forces under Josef Pilsudski in April 1920 sparked a short but brutal war that would have far-reaching implications for the political and military development of Russia, soon to be the Soviet Union. Confident in their ability to defeat the Poles easily following their victory in the civil war, and eager to export the socialist revolution across the European continent, the Red Army found itself fighting on foreign soil for the first time. With firm belief in their tactics, organization, and the inevitability of worker’s and peasant’s revolution wherever they went, the political and military leaders of Soviet Russia found themselves poised for a monumental victory along the banks of the Vistula. The “miraculous” counterattack by the Polish army and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet plan shattered the Red Army’s paradigm and caused its leaders and theorists to devote themselves to the development of a new theory of warfare that could address the crisis that was their defeat by Pilsudski.

The Polish-Soviet War (alternatively the Russo-Polish or Polish-Bolshevik War) has been understandably overshadowed by the World Wars that came before and after it briefly captivated the western world in the spring and summer of 1920. It is often only mentioned these days as but one front in the greater Russian Civil War, a fact that makes distilling its unique characteristics that much more difficult. This war was not merely a continuation of the Red on White conflicts in

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<sup>32</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 4th English ed., vol. 30 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 439-490.

which the Red Army had emerged triumphant, it was to be “its harshest test yet, while at the same time providing valuable lessons for the years to come.”<sup>33</sup>

## Kiev is in the Hands of the Polish Gentry!

Both sides conducted sizable military operations in the borderlands separating Poland and Russia in the months leading up to Pilsudski’s Ukrainian offensive, most notably with the Polish seizure of both Wilno (Vilnius) and Minsk. However, the generally accepted start of the war coincides with the Polish commander’s bold thrust into the heart of the Ukraine following the breakdown in negotiations in April 1920. As both Commander-in-Chief of the Polish military and Head of State, Pilsudski influenced the conduct and outcome of the conflict more than any other individual on either side. A former socialist and fervent nationalist, his primary political goal was the establishment of a chain of independent states between Poland and Russia, serving as the barrier to invasion that Eastern Europe’s flat topography could not provide. To accomplish this goal he planned a preemptive invasion of the borderlands to destroy Red Army forces assigned to their Western Front.<sup>34</sup>

While the scale and ferocity of the Polish attack was unexpected, it was not entirely surprising, and indeed, it was seen as “an opportunity to resolve the conflict with Poland on Soviet terms.”<sup>35</sup> One can imagine the almost gleeful atmosphere that must have pervaded Trotsky’s personal armored train as he hammered out a communique decrying the “perfidy and treachery” of the Polish landed class and the Red Army’s destiny in delivering Pilsudski and his minions the same fate as vanquished foes Denikin, Kolchak, and Yudenivich.<sup>36</sup> Trotsky’s confidence was not

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<sup>33</sup> Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 107.

<sup>34</sup> Josef Pilsudski, *Year 1920* (1924; repr., New York: Pilsudski Institute of America, 1972), 14, 30.

<sup>35</sup> Ziemke, *The Red Army 1918-1941*, 118.

<sup>36</sup> Leon Trotsky, “Kiev is in the Hands of the Polish Gentry,” *En Route*, no. 110, May 8, 1920, accessed March 30, 2017, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1920/military/ch27.htm>

wholly misplaced, as the Polish drive to the Dnieper stalled and the Red Army planned their counteroffensive in both the Ukraine and Belarus. The Polish invasion also provided a shot in the arm to the Soviet propaganda apparatus whose appeals found more receptive ears, particularly amongst the former officers of the Tsar's army who heeded the call to arms made by World War hero General Brusilov.<sup>37</sup>

The Soviet counteroffensive unfolded in two discrete sectors, with Tukhachevsky commanding the Western Front in the north and Yegorov commanding the Southwest Front (with Stalin as his political commissar). One of the defining geographic features of the borderlands, the Pripet Marshes, neatly divided the two Fronts and made it nearly impossible for Pilsudski to shift forces between the two areas quickly enough to resist the Soviet onslaught. Polish forces in the north met Tukhachevsky's attack ably enough, but were unable to seize the initiative, while along the Dnieper, "Southwest Front's heroic cavalry army [had] broken through the enemy front," threatening to encircle the Polish 3rd Army.<sup>38</sup> Pilsudski himself would acknowledge that he had underestimated the threat posed by Buddenyi's *Konarmiya*, particularly its effect on the rear where "panic spread very wide and deep" and the cavalry army morphed into "a legendary invincible force" in the eyes of the Poles.<sup>39</sup>

Invincible or not, this action in the south demanded resources and diverted Pilsudski's attention from the north, where Tukhachevsky was primed to launch another offensive. He had not been idle in the weeks following his first unsuccessful attack. An ambitious reorganization and refit period commenced, with particular attention paid to Tukhachevsky's *betes noires*, insufficient communications equipment and inefficient command structure. Having reached a level of satisfaction in this regard for the first (and only) time during the campaign and with a force large

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<sup>37</sup> Pilsudski, *Year 1920*, 31.

<sup>38</sup> Ziemke, *The Red Army 1918-1941*, 121.

<sup>39</sup> Pilsudski, *Year 1920*, 83.



enough to accomplish the more ambitious aims he had set for the Western Front, their commander was understandably confident.<sup>40</sup>

## March to the Vistula

Tukhachevsky's plan for the July offensive was not demonstrably different from that conducted in May. With four and a half armies attacking along a broad front stretching from the Baltic states to the Pripet Marshes, he sought to engage the Polish forces along the entire breadth of their front, opening themselves up to an operational level penetration in the center, where the Soviet XVth Army had been given the resources deemed necessary to accomplish this goal.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, this army would serve as the basis for Triandafillov's later theories on the use of shock armies as the means to achieve penetration.<sup>42</sup> As is often the case, this plan did not survive first contact with the enemy, but the studious preparations made by the Front commander paid off in spades, allowing Tukhachevsky to press the advantage in the north, where his IVth Army had turned the Polish flank. This ability to unhinge successive defensive lines by army-level flanking maneuvers completely disrupted the Poles' ability to mount an effective defense despite the presence of numerous defensible rivers and even World War I trench lines. Western Front's march began to pick up steam and in Tukhachevsky's description of its operations we see the kernel of Deep Battle theory. Through study and experience he accepted that the conditions of modern warfare did not support the pursuit of a single decisive battle. Instead, it was necessary "to do this gradually by...a series of destructive operations conducted on logical principles and linked together by an uninterrupted pursuit."<sup>43</sup> Post-war studies by his colleagues, most notably Triandafillov,

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<sup>40</sup> Pilsudski, *Year 1920*, 232.

<sup>41</sup> Manning, "Battle on the Vistula," 17.

<sup>42</sup> Vladimir K. Triandafillov, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, ed. Jacob W. Kipp, trans. William A. Burhans (1929, London: Routledge, 1994), 109.

<sup>43</sup> Pilsudski, *Year 1920*, 240.

Varfolomeev, and Movchin, would further develop Tukhachevsky's observations, leading to the foundational concept of successive operations.

In this, he would not be entirely successful. Through July and early August, Western Front would drive Pilsudski's forces across the frontier and eastern Poland, leaving them situated along the Vistula in a last-gasp defense of the Polish heartland and capital. Pilsudski provides a vivid description of their advance, likening it to "a monstrous storm-cloud which nothing can hinder...that engenders despair and breaks the internal resistance of the individual and the mass."<sup>44</sup> However, despite being driven hundreds of miles and demoralized at the hands of a seemingly irresistible foe, the Polish army would regroup and reinvigorate itself, and launch a stunning counterattack when all seemed lost. Here we will see the cause of Tukhachevsky's later caution against assigning too much value to the decisive effects of breaking the adversary's psychological cohesion.<sup>45</sup>

## The 18th Decisive Battle<sup>46</sup>

With all available forces streaming towards Warsaw and the key crossing sites along the Vistula, the stage would soon be set for an event that established the strategic situation in Europe for the following nineteen years. The cast of players was a colorful one, and all that remained was the determination of heroes and villains, as Europe waited, enthralled. The entente powers had not been completely inactive. Having finally overcome their ambivalence towards Poland and desperate to stem the Bolshevik tide, both France and Britain sent supplies and military advisors. There is some debate as to the role this assistance played in Poland's coming victory, with Poland adamant

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<sup>44</sup> Pilsudski, *Year 1920*, 142.

<sup>45</sup> Mikhail Tukhachevsky, "The Battle of the Bugs," in *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii*, trans. Richard Simpkin (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1987), 86-87.

<sup>46</sup> Manning, "Battle on the Vistula," 25.

about its miniscule role and everyone else eager to point to it as the decisive factor. As it so often does, the truth likely lies somewhere in the middle and it would be foolish to completely dismiss the contributions of French General Weygand in particular, and the buoying effect of international support in general.<sup>47</sup> However, it would be considerably more foolish to attempt to deny the victory laurels to Pilsudski and his valiant army.

These laurels would have to be wrested from Tukhachevsky and the seemingly unstoppable Western Front. Choosing to focus most of his forces on the area north of Warsaw, where the Vistula bends northwestward towards Gdansk (Danzig), Tukhachevsky sought to sever this key line of communication and envelop Warsaw.<sup>48</sup> This maneuver would exacerbate the widening split between his Western Front and Yegorov's Southwestern Front, which no longer had the Pripyet Marshes as a barrier against Polish exploitation. To solve this conundrum without diverting his own forces, Tukhachevsky requested, and received command and control over the XIIth and 1st Cavalry Armies from Southwest Front. Much of the ensuing political maneuvering has been lost to history and Stalin-era revisionism, but what is clear is that neither army was in any position to cover this widening gap by the time Western Front launched their final offensive on 14 August.<sup>49</sup> Tukhachevsky's insistence on the far-northern line of operation and his dismissal of any possibility of Polish counteroffensive gave Pilsudski the opening he had been waiting for. Additionally, the resulting animosity between partisans of the two Fronts would rage for years following the end of the war, greatly affecting the future of the Red Army, particularly the acceptance of Deep Battle and Deep Operations theory. Unfortunately for Tukhachevsky and his followers, there is a strong likelihood that this grudge stayed in Stalin's mind up through the purges in the mid-1930s.

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<sup>47</sup> Manning, "Battle on the Vistula," 24.

<sup>48</sup> Pilsudski, *Year 1920*, 256.

<sup>49</sup> Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, 97.

As Commander-in-Chief and Head of State, Pilsudski did not experience that same issues with adjacent commands, but he still had to impress his vision for a sweeping counterattack launched from the south on his subordinates. Choosing his most trusted leader General Smigly-Rydz and his old Polish Legion divisions to lead the counterattack, Pilsudski amassed five-and-a-half divisions south of Warsaw, poised to strike north into the exposed flank of the Soviet Western Front.<sup>50</sup> Setting the date for the operation for August 16th, he agonized over whether this force was strong enough to carry out its mission. Writing after the war, his opponent Tukhachevsky would chide him committing insufficient strength to this force, claiming that only Soviet errors allowed this blow to land on an unprepared opponent and had things played out otherwise the Poles “would undoubtedly have been crushed.”<sup>51</sup>

As it happened, however, Pilsudski’s counterattack was a masterstroke. The limited Soviet forces present were quickly swept aside and with successive bold advances, the Poles worked their way behind the bulk of Western Front, cutting off their lines of communication and bringing their inexorable advance to an unexpected and dramatic end. With the promised reinforcements from Southwestern Front engaged in a superfluous operation against Lwow (Lviv), Tukhachevsky was left with no choice but to order a retreat of the entire Western Front towards the Polish frontier. Brave and desperate rearguard actions and the inability of Pilsudski to maximize the opportunity for pursuit allowed substantial numbers of Soviet troops to escape, but it was clear that there would be no subsequent counterattacks coming from the east in 1920.

## The Red Army Looks Inward

The strategic ramifications of the Polish victory in 1920 are plentiful. Soviet Russia’s potential for exporting the Bolshevik Revolution suffered a monumental blow as unbounded

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<sup>50</sup> Pilsudski, *Year 1920*, 170.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

expectations met the harsh reality that “the war with the White Poles in 1920 faced the Red Army with the considerably more complex and more difficult set of problems associated with carrying war into another nation’s territory.”<sup>52</sup> The terms of the Treaty of Riga were reached that fall and granted Poland much of the buffer area it went to war to get, while allowing the Soviet Russians to focus inward and address their pressing economic concerns. For the Red Army, “the Warsaw operation seared itself into [their] collective consciousness as did no other event of the 1918-20 period.”<sup>53</sup> The forthcoming collective reflection on the Polish war would help revolutionize modern warfare and provide the foundation for the Red Army’s eventual victory in the cataclysmic conflict to come.

## Developing Deep Operations Theory of Annihilation

When a December 1920 issue of Pravda put forth the new slogan, “The fronts are quiet. There is work to be done in the rear,” the leadership of the Red Army set out to address their failure against Poland and the implications it had for their theories of war and warfare.<sup>54</sup> Their challenge was not just to understand the difficulties inherent in spreading revolution to other countries, but also to develop a theory capable of surmounting the obstacles presented by modern war. A vibrant debate would ensue, with some of the interwar period’s sharpest military minds grappling with questions such as attrition vs. annihilation strategies, organization and control of massive mechanized armies, and the role of a nation’s industrial base. All sought to identify the ways and means through which they could transform tactical victory on the battlefield into accomplishment of the state’s political aims. The result of this decade-and-a-half long effort would produce a

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<sup>52</sup> Mikhail. Tukhachevsky, “War as a Problem of Armed Struggle,” (1928) in *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii*, trans. Richard Simpkin (London: Brassey’s Defence Publishers, 1987), 115.

<sup>53</sup> Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 118.

<sup>54</sup> Ziemke, *The Red Army 1918-1941*, 135.

comprehensive doctrine that addressed the challenges of modern warfare and would play an integral role in the Soviet Union's ultimate victory against the Nazi war machine.

Eager to capitalize on the experience and insight of their new crop of veterans, the Red Army set about the difficult business of establishing the educational and doctrinal development apparatus of a modern professional army. No longer fighting for the very existence of the Soviet state, many Red Army officers devoted themselves to examining the campaigns they had recently concluded, in the hopes that lessons would emerge that provided keys to unlocking the puzzle that was modern warfare. For the man who would emerge at the forefront of this intellectual exploration, Mikhail Tukhachevsky, the Soviet campaign in Poland was the case "most relevant to the development of Soviet military art," and his efforts to dissect this event would bring several key concepts to light, while engaging the Red Army's most capable minds.<sup>55</sup> On the cusp of landing a decisive blow against a reeling enemy and bringing a brilliant campaign of maneuver to a glorious conclusion, the Red Army found itself the victim of an even more audacious maneuver outside of Warsaw in August 1920. For Tukhachevsky and others committed to Russia's defense, their life's work lay in interpreting the lessons of this campaign and using them to develop a new Soviet way of warfare that would provide the Red Army with a theoretical foundation for victory.

## The Soviet Way – Attrition or Annihilation?

The seeds for substantial theoretical progress were sown, but much work remained. The Treaty of Riga ended the war with Poland, allowing a chastened Soviet regime the opportunity to focus on consolidating its power and preparing for future war with the imperialist powers. Among the fundamental organizational and philosophical questions facing the Soviet and Red Army leadership were those regarding the size and composition of the army (militia vs. professional, mass vs. technology) as well as its grand strategic outlook (communism in one country vs. exporting the

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<sup>55</sup> Triandafillov, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, xi.

revolution) and way of war (attrition vs. annihilation). While Tukhachevsky, Frunze, and other senior military leaders played significant roles in debating all of these issues, it was the last which would set the stage for the theoretical breakthroughs that followed the adoption of annihilation as the basis for the new Soviet way of war.

The attrition-annihilation debate consumed a considerable amount of intellectual energy and involved many of the foremost Soviet military minds of the early 1920s, but two figures emerged as the exemplars of this discussion: Svechin and Tukhachevsky. Both men were former Tsarist officers and aristocrats, however. Svechin had joined the Red Army as a *voenspets* (military specialist) brought on by Trotsky to help develop the fledgling Red Army, while the younger Tukhachevsky became a passionate party member early on and would use Svechin's aristocratic sympathies (real or imagined) as a bludgeon in their intellectual fencing match.<sup>56</sup> Svechin's masterpiece *Strategy* most clearly articulates the two positions of this formative debate and explains their genesis as concepts developed by German theorist Hans Delbrueck.<sup>57</sup> Importantly, he also cites the failure of Tukhachevsky's 1920 campaign as evidence against the strategy of annihilation observing that "on the way to the Vistula, the Red Army... [was] unable to win extraordinary victories," decisive victories in the Napoleonic mold that he believed were required for this type of strategy's success.<sup>58</sup>

Sensing that this was no mere academic debate, but an inherently political one, Tukhachevsky seized the initiative through a series of impassioned arguments in favor of the more politically popular offensive strategy of annihilation, employing both his considerable intellect and

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas G. Butson, *The Tsar's Lieutenant, The Soviet Marshal* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984), 151.

<sup>57</sup> Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy*, ed. and trans. Kent D. Lee (1927, re. 1992, Minneapolis, MN: East View Publications), 65. This work also serves as a foundational exploration of the concept of operational art and the existence of the intermediate operational level of war.

<sup>58</sup> Svechin, *Strategy*, 243.

a complete lack of remorse in aiming powerful personal invective against his erstwhile comrades.<sup>59</sup> Recognizing the failure of the strategy of annihilation in previous conflicts, Tukhachevsky argued that the potential of new technology, married with the inherently offensive spirit of the Red Army soldier, would set the conditions necessary for annihilation to succeed. Despite Svechin's insistence that "a strategic policy must be devised for every war [as] each war is a special case, which requires its own particular logic," and thus, his preference for an attritional, defensive strategy only applied to the current political, economic, and military circumstances, Tukhachevsky and his allies had successfully branded Svechin as a bourgeois, defeatist thinker.<sup>60</sup> So successful were they, this belief has persisted to this day, with David Stone noting that Svechin is still "overwhelmingly characterized in the Western scholarly and professional literature as a partisan of attrition as the proper basis for strategy and tactics," with little acknowledgement of his support of annihilation given the proper conditions.<sup>61</sup>

The question of attrition vs. annihilation (or at least the Red Army's formal position on it) was emphatically answered at the first All-Union Congress of the Military-Scientific Society in 1926. The majority of delegates supported Tukhachevsky's position, with lectures by him and Triandafillov setting the course for Soviet operational art for years to come. For the Red Army after this point "the aim of an operation was solely the destruction of enemy personnel and equipment," all other considerations were subordinate to this goal.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Harrison, *The Russian Way of War*, 130-134; Simpkin, *Deep Battle*, 88.

<sup>60</sup> Svechin, *Strategy*, 63.

<sup>61</sup> David R. Stone, "Misreading Svechin," *The Journal of Military History* 76 (July 2012): 673-693.

<sup>62</sup> Igor Mariyevsky, "Formation and Development of the Theory of Operational Art," in *Selected Readings in the History of Soviet Operational Art*, trans. Harold S. Orenstein (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Soviet Army Studies Office, 1990), 15.



## Successive Operations – Annihilation through Operational Art

With the destruction of enemy armies firmly established as the *purpose* of the Red Army, attention now shifted to the *method* through which this would be accomplished. Again, Tukhachevsky emerges as a central figure, with his 1920 offensive serving as a popular case study for the embryonic concept of successive operations. In his 1923 analysis of the Vistula campaign, he reconciles his belief in annihilation as the surest path to victory with the clear evidence suggesting that the pre-World War I decisive battle was no longer possible, noting that “a series of destructive operations conducted on logical principles and linked together by an uninterrupted pursuit may take the place of the decisive battle.”<sup>63</sup>

His colleague at the RKKA Military Academy, Nikolai Varfolomeev, further developed this idea, claiming that “the path to victory under modern conditions lies on the zigzag of an entire series of operations, successively developing one after another, logically connected to one another, united by the commonality of the ultimate aim, each one achieving limited intermediate aims which are in their totality the operational pursuit.”<sup>64</sup> He would go on to contrast the success of such linked operations in several campaigns in the Russian Civil War with the ultimate failure of the war against Poland, arguing that logistical and command and control failures lay at the heart of their defeat.

A 1983 study conducted by a Soviet officer examining the development of the theory of successive operations noted that for the Red Army theorists of the 1920s the summer offensive launched by Tukhachevsky’s Western Front “was taken as the most typical example of successive operations.”<sup>65</sup> The author also highlights the impactful role played by N.N. Movchin in shaping this

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<sup>63</sup> Pilsudski, *Year 1920*, 240.

<sup>64</sup> Nikolai Varfolomeev, “Strategy in an Academic Formulation,” (1928) in *Selected Readings in the History of Soviet Operational Art*, trans. Harold S. Orenstein (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Soviet Army Studies Office, 1990), 6-7.

<sup>65</sup> Robert A. Savushkin, “On the Issue of the Origin of the Theory of Successive Operations,” (1983) in *Selected Readings in the History of Soviet Operational Art*, trans. Harold S.

theory based on his intensive study of both the Vistula campaign and that waged by the German army on the Western Front in 1914. Movchin's most significant contribution was the description of successive operations as unfolding in three distinct phases: the initial operation, the pursuit operation, and the decisive operation.<sup>66</sup>

His ideas, in turn, were developed further by an individual overshadowed only by Tukhachevsky in importance to the development of Deep Operations theory: Vladimir K. Triandafillov. His work on successive operations and the command of army-level formations deftly combined thorough detailed analysis of the mechanics and mathematics involved in maneuvering large formations with insightful conceptual explorations of modern warfare. For Triandafillov, successive operations could only succeed if they designed an army for that specific purpose, and resourced it appropriately.<sup>67</sup> Like Tukhachevsky, he envisioned massive million-man armies, supported by tanks and airpower as the only appropriate tool on the modern battlefield. Indeed, the relationship between the two men was likely the most important intellectual (and operational) partnership of the era, with Triandafillov serving as partner, foil, and amanuensis simultaneously.<sup>68</sup> Triandafillov's monumental work, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, provided a fully developed vision of successive operations as the means to defeat an adversary through the entire depth of his formation, what Isserson would later call the central operational challenge of modern warfare.<sup>69</sup> Tragically, he would not live to see his vision evolve into a concrete doctrine as he perished in a plane crash in 1931. But tragedy could not undo the significant progress he had

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Orenstein (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Soviet Army Studies Office, 1990), 97.

<sup>66</sup> Savushkin, "On the Issue of the Origin of the Theory of Successive Operations," 97; Triandafillov, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, xxxii.

<sup>67</sup> Triandafillov, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, 128.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., xi, xx; Simpkin, *Deep Battle*, 81.

<sup>69</sup> Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 26.

made, and Tukhachevsky, Isserson and others set out to honor their comrade's memory by building on his brilliant work.

This effort would in many ways culminate with the publishing of PU-36. Edited and in many places authored by Isserson, this document would solidify Deep Battle concepts at the tactical level and introduce the fundamental ideas of Deep Operations into Soviet doctrine. In describing these concepts, Isserson provides us with a vivid picture of successive operations and how they form the backbone of the Deep Battle and Deep Operations theories. At both the tactical and operational level, "the offensive should resemble a series of waves striking a coastline with growing intensity, trying to ruin it and wash it away with continuous blows from the depths."<sup>70</sup>

## Rear Operations – Managing the Friendly Depths

The theorists who developed successive operations and used it as a theoretical foundation for Deep Operations frequently looked to their recent military history in an attempt to identify trends that would characterize future warfare. World War I retained relevance for operational matters, but Marxist doctrine allowed it to be dismissed when investigating political or economic questions, including military logistics issues and political influence operations in the army's rear area. The brisk campaigns of the Civil War were celebrated, but most serious theorists understood that they "were conducted under peculiar circumstances," and taught lessons that may not be applicable in the future.<sup>71</sup> Varfolomeev and others would look again to the 1920 campaign against Poland as more representative of the "political and materiel support" challenges that would define future conflict, so much so that their study would be one of the RKKA Academy's main areas of focus in the 1920s.<sup>72</sup> Examination of this campaign would reveal the dangers of conducting a large-

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<sup>70</sup> Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 57.

<sup>71</sup> Varfolomeev, "Strategy in an Academic Formulation," 6.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 7.

scale operation without accounting for personnel losses, stretched supply lines, inadequate signals equipment, and a foreign population unreceptive to messages of fraternal proletarian unity. Svechin grimly summed up the state of Tukhachevsky's Western Front as it approached Warsaw, noting that it "had become so numerically weak and so cut off from their sources of supply that they were more phantoms than reality."<sup>73</sup>

To his credit, Tukhachevsky did not shy away from criticism of his failure to set the materiel conditions for his offensive, and his post-war works would frequently contain admonitions to prioritize logistical and signals planning, noting that "a well-conceived operation must be planned and backed with materiel over its whole course, right up to the destruction of the enemy."<sup>74</sup> With his typical foresight, Tukhachevsky realized that the changing conditions on the battlefield would necessitate reimagining the role and requirements of the Red Army's logistics apparatus, including its mobility and survivability, as well as its relationship to the national industrial base.<sup>75</sup> Unsurprisingly, Triandafillov's thinking followed a similar vein, even advocating for the "mechanization of logistics," and displaying marked concern over the issue of replacing personnel losses at the height of conflict.<sup>76</sup>

For both men rear operations did not consist solely of logistics and communications concerns. As devoted Marxists, they highlighted the political, class-based nature of their envisioned future war, in which "political support tasks" would play an important role in preserving the

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<sup>73</sup> Svechin, *Strategy*, 243.

<sup>74</sup> Mikhail Tukhachevsky, "Questions of Higher Command," (1928) in *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii*, trans. Richard Simpkin (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1987), 94.

<sup>75</sup> Mikhail Tukhachevsky, "War as a Problem of Armed Struggle," (1928) and "New Questions of War," (1932) in *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii*, trans. Richard Simpkin (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1987), 102, 146.

<sup>76</sup> Triandafillov, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, 65, 125.

offensive spirit of the Red Army while ensuring the security of the rear area.<sup>77</sup> Tukhachevsky saw a distinct Soviet advantage in this domain due to the universal appeal of the Bolshevik message to proletarians, regardless of nationality.<sup>78</sup> That he remained dedicated to this idea even after it was seemingly disproven in Poland gives a glimpse of his intellectual obstinance, but also shows how pervasive this attitude was. As such, that most remarkable of doctrinal publications, PU-36, required all Red Army soldiers and officers to engage in “political work,” aimed at “winning the worker and peasant masses of the enemy army and the population of the theaters of military operations over to the side of the proletarian revolution, [as it] is a most important condition of victory over the enemy.”<sup>79</sup>

## Shock Armies – The Tools of Annihilation<sup>80</sup>

With the Red Army firmly focused on achieving victory through annihilation, and successive operations supported by significant logistics, signal, and political support from the rear established as the *method* through which to achieve this goal, all that remained was to determine the appropriate *tool* to employ in its pursuit. As with many of the other conceptual blocks that would become Deep Operations theory, the Red Army turned to the seemingly bottomless quarry that was the 1920 campaign in Poland for its building material. Tukhachevsky identified the task

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<sup>77</sup> Triandafillov, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, 159.

<sup>78</sup> Tukhachevsky, “War as a Problem of Armed Struggle,” 123.

<sup>79</sup> Joint Publications Research Service, *Provisional Field Regulations for the Red Army 1936*, 7.

<sup>80</sup> The term “Shock Army” or “Shock Group” has been beset by misunderstanding and misuse within Western military circles. Israeli theorist Dr. Shimon Naveh exemplifies this school in his book, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence* (164-238), linking Soviet theories to a concept of “operational shock” derived from the Russian word *udar*. Naveh and others have interpreted *udar* to mean an “operational shock” that results from a disruptive, disorienting strike aimed at paralyzing the adversary’s “system.” As shown, Tukhachevsky deliberately rejects this interpretation of “shock” and insists that physical destruction must be the aim of offensive operations. Tukhachevsky’s *udar* seems much closer to the true translation of the word: hit, impact, blow, or strike. A.D. Kostrov, *Russko-Angliiskii Anglo-Russkii Voennyi Slovar'* (Moscow: Tekhnicheskii Slovari, 2002), 409.

organization of his XVth and XVIth Armies and their employment in Western Front's "decisive sector" as critical for the success of his remarkable advance across Belarus and eastern Poland.<sup>81</sup> Triandafillov recognized the potential of Tukhachevsky's "battering ram," but understood that for it to become a true shock army, "capable with its own forces of conducting a series of successive operations from start to finish, it must have the resources that will allow it to surmount any enemy resistance," to include additional artillery, tanks, and aviation assets.<sup>82</sup>

The development and employment of these supporting assets took on increasing importance in the theoretical debates taking place in the early-mid 1930s, with Tukhachevsky emerging as a passionate advocate for aviation, airborne operations, and mechanized warfare. Expanding on the ideas of Triandafillov (which very well could have been his to begin with), Tukhachevsky described the roles envisioned for tanks, namely direct infantry support and pursuit and seizure of the enemy's rear area. Assisting the long-range armored forces would be tactical aviation and airborne forces, employed to destroy the enemy throughout its operational depth.<sup>83</sup>

The wedding of theoretical concepts with emerging technology continued apace when RKKA Chief of Staff Yegorov issued a report to the Revolutionary Military Council in which he endorsed many of Tukhachevsky's ideas, especially the creation of "powerful formations such as aviation and mechanized corps...which make it possible to pose the problem of the nature of the battle and operation in a new way."<sup>84</sup> Yegorov's report would form the basis for interim publications outlining the tactical concept of Deep Battle and the clear path to emergent Deep

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<sup>81</sup> Pilsudski, *Year 1920*, 239.

<sup>82</sup> Triandafillov, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, 90-91.

<sup>83</sup> Mikhail Tukhachevsky, "New Questions of War," (1932) in *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii*, trans. Richard Simpkin (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1987), 137-141.

<sup>84</sup> Alexander I. Yegorov, "Tactics and Operational Art of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army at a New Stage," (1932) in *Selected Readings in the History of Soviet Operational Art*, trans. Harold S. Orenstein (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Soviet Army Studies Office, 1990), 20.

Operations theory, while confirming the Red Army leadership's commitment to the further development of these ideas. Coinciding with the feverish industrial and technological development of Stalin's first and second Five-Year Plans, the Red Army during this period was on the verge of constructing a tool capable of realizing Isserson's wave-like vision.<sup>85</sup>

This vision, the Deep Operations theory of Annihilation, would come close to its full fruition with the publishing of PU-36, which Tukhachevsky would call "a document of enormous importance."<sup>86</sup> Both he and Isserson would highlight the emphasis on the necessity of combined arms action at all levels and its focus on the goal of destruction as the core of PU-36, and thus, the Red Army's way of warfare. They both cite approvingly Article 164 as an apt description of this aim whereby "the enemy should be pinned down over the entire depth of his dispositions, encircled and destroyed."<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion

If the development and publishing of PU-36 was a triumph for the advocates of Deep Operations theory, then what was to follow is surely tragedy. Just weeks after his 1937 article praising PU-36 was published in *Red Star*, Tukhachevsky and several other Red Army leaders were arrested, tried, and executed.<sup>88</sup> This shattered the illusion that the army would avoid Stalin's machinations and would have terrible consequences for the Soviet Union in the coming conflict. These consequences were foreseen by none other than Tukhachevsky, who even on the eve of his

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<sup>85</sup> Georgii S. Isserson, "The Development of the Theory of Soviet Operational Art in the 1930s," (1965) in *Selected Readings in the History of Soviet Operational Art*, trans. Harold S. Orenstein (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Soviet Army Studies Office, 1990), 35.

<sup>86</sup> Mikhail Tukhachevsky, "Red Army's New Field Service Regulations," (1937) in *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii*, trans. Richard Simpkin (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1987), 174.

<sup>87</sup> Joint Publications Research Service, *Provisional Field Regulations for the Red Army 1936*, 52-53; Isserson, "The Development of the Theory of Soviet Operational Art in the 1930s," 36; Tukhachevsky, "Red Army's New Field Service Regulations," 170.

<sup>88</sup> Butson, *The Tsar's Lieutenant*, 222-226.

execution at the hands of his erstwhile comrades is reported to have written a warning, that “fascist Germany will attack the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941 with up to 200 mobile divisions.”<sup>89</sup> With most of the Red Army’s brightest minds purged and the innovative doctrine and organizational concepts they formulated discredited by Stalin and his old Tsaritsyn clique, the German attack envisioned by Tukhachevsky nearly defeated the USSR.

The remarkable recovery by the Soviet people and the Red Army is a subject far beyond the scope of this monograph, but Isserson’s post-war assertion, echoed by others, that one of the primary reasons for their eventual victory was the re-adoption and implementation of the Deep Operations theory of Annihilation, merits mention.<sup>90</sup> The incredible offensives launched by the Red Army across Belarus, Ukraine, and Poland in World War II may have been the clearest operational expression of this theory, but did the smaller (if no less impressive) attacks along the same axes in 1920 mark its genesis?

The Polish-Soviet War certainly deserves examination beyond its current perceived place as either bookend of the Russian Civil War or curious aftershock of the Great War. Looking past the considerable strategic and political implications of the Polish victory in 1920, this monograph has attempted to show that the characteristics and lessons learned from the conflict, particularly on the Soviet side, played a formative role in the development of the theory of Deep Operations for Annihilation. Most significantly, the conduct of Tukhachevsky’s awe-inspiring advance towards the Vistula revealed the importance of two of the keys to Deep Operations (successive operations and shock armies) while Pilsudski’s stunning counterstrike revealed its key weakness (inadequate rear operations).

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<sup>89</sup> Butson, *The Tsar’s Lieutenant*, 230.

<sup>90</sup> Isserson, “The Development of the Theory of Soviet Operational Art in the 1930s,” 45; David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 154-156.



Of course, the development of such an innovative theory, with the doctrinal, organizational, and technological changes that accompanied it, cannot be attributed to one causal event. The RKKA Academy ensured that students were as versed in the Marne, Tannenberg, and March 1918 German offensives of World War I as they were in their own Civil War and the war with Poland. Indeed, Isserson believed that the very purpose of Deep Operations was to crush a World War I-style continuous front.<sup>91</sup>

Another key factor in the development of these concepts would be the secret military cooperation conducted between the Red Army and the Reichswehr following the 1922 Treaty of Rapallo. The training and educational exchanges carried out between these former foes and fellow post-war pariahs seems to have had significant impact on both armies and warrants further detailed study.<sup>92</sup>

However, the presence of these other important influences on Soviet theoretical development in no way diminishes the critical role of the Polish-Soviet War. No other conflict (not World War I, nor the Civil War) combined the characteristics deemed representative of future war in Eastern Europe as completely as the 1920 war. Politically, ideologically, geographically, and operationally, this conflict set the stage for Tukhachevsky and his colleagues to formulate a theory of warfare that could defeat the continuous front paradigm, while upholding the ideological values of the Red Army.

After years of debate and development, the answer would emerge: the Deep Operations theory of Annihilation, captured most completely in doctrine by PU-36. In his article lauding its publication, Tukhachevsky describes an essential part of the theory as “taking the enemy in the

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<sup>91</sup> Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 38.

<sup>92</sup> Sally W. Stoecker, *Forging Stalin's Army: Marshal Tukhachevsky and the Politics of Military Innovation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 77-105.

flank and getting astride his withdrawal routes – that’s what PU-36 is all about.” One imagines him picturing wistfully the broad, blue waters of the Vistula as he penned those lines.

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